



Giles Constable in the Director's Office, 1978. Dumbarton Oaks Archives, AR.PH.DO.005.

Giles Constable

(1929–2021)

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Giles Constable, third Director of Dumbarton Oaks, died on 17 January 2021 at his home in Princeton, NJ, of complications from long-standing ailments. Constable was the former Henry C. Lea Professor of Medieval History at Harvard University and emeritus professor in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study. Coming at a critical moment in the life of Dumbarton Oaks, Constable's steady leadership, international standing as one of the great scholars of his generation, and deep understanding of the workings of Harvard University laid, in a time of change and challenge, the foundations for institutional innovations that have made possible the last forty years of the institution's unbroken success in all three of its programs.

Aptly described by the Institute of Advanced Study as “a giant in the field of medieval history,”¹ Prof. Constable was the foremost historian of medieval monasticism in our time. Born in London in 1929, he moved to Cambridge, MA, with his family in 1938. His father, William George Constable, a distant relative of the landscape painter, was an accomplished art historian who specialized notably in Canaletto. The elder Constable left the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at the University of Cambridge and the founding directorship of the Courtauld Institute to become Curator of

Painting at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. The younger Constable's early schooling was in Cambridge at Brown and Nichols and at Phillips Academy, Andover. He received his AB from Harvard College in 1950. A precocious medievalist, Constable wrote a fifty-three-page freshman term paper on Liudprand of Cremona's *Antapodosis*, replete with quotations of the Ottonian ambassador's Latin and Greek report on his mission to Constantinople. His robust senior thesis treated the public life of a twelfth-century man of letters, John of Salisbury, who would make frequent reappearances in Constable's mature scholarship.

Constable's PhD in medieval history (1957), also at Harvard, included a stint at St. John's College, Cambridge, UK. His doctoral dissertation edited the *Letters of Peter the Venerable*, abbot of the mighty monastery of Cluny. As one of the twelfth-century's leading figures, Peter's correspondents included popes, patriarchs, emperors, and prelates. Identifying them introduced Constable to the makers and shakers of that great era of wealth and renewal, to the deep tradition of scholarship the letters had already attracted, and to the questions and controversies that involved Peter. Those questions ranged from the Latin translation of the Qur'an commissioned by Peter to Heloise's thanks to him for bringing to her for burial the body of her beloved Abelard, whom Peter had received and protected at Cluny. Peter raised for his abbey one of the greatest Romanesque churches in medieval Europe; its massive ruins still draw tourists to the small Burgundian town, and its

1 “Giles Constable, Leading Medievalist and Mentor, Dies at 91,” Institute for Advanced Study, 19 January 2021, <https://www.ias.edu/news/2021/giles-constable-leading-medievalist-and-mentor-dies-91>.

builders likely constructed the small but beautiful twelfth-century house that Constable purchased and restored in the 1990s, to which he retreated with pleasure in fine weather. Perhaps there was something of this medieval abbot's measured character, at once firm but inclined to astute compromise, that resonated with Constable's own personality.

At Harvard, Constable studied particularly under Helen Maude Cam, a distinguished historian of local administration in medieval England and the first woman appointed as a full professor in Harvard's Faculty of Art and Sciences. That experience may have helped shape his strong feelings about the injustice which routinely hampered the careers of brilliant scholars who happened to be women, such as his venerated friend, Mlle. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny. He kept on his desk a photograph of "Miss Cam," which served as the model for the portrait of Cam that now hangs in Harvard's University Hall and was hand-carried from Princeton to Cambridge when the university belatedly discovered and sought to honor her accomplishments. The ancient and medieval historian and epigrapher Herbert Bloch, Pope Professor of Latin, was Constable's dissertation advisor. Bloch may have been Constable's first connection to Dumbarton Oaks. A native Berliner and former student there of, among others, Gerhart Rodenwaldt (himself a student of Theodor Mommsen) as well as the church historian Erich Caspar, Bloch had completed his doctoral dissertation in Italy with Arnaldo Momigliano. Recently escaped from Fascist Italy and Germany, Bloch held in 1941–42 a Junior Fellowship in Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in the second year of the program's existence. Through Bloch, Constable noted that he was in the third generation of Mommsen's students.

Constable always remembered with fondness his initial teaching appointment at the University of Iowa (1955–58), which he left to return to Harvard. There he taught in the Department of History and rose through the ranks to tenure in 1966. At Harvard, Constable would train a generation of distinguished medieval historians and instruct countless undergraduates. One enduring contribution to the institutional and academic life of the university was his achievement, with his friend Larry Benson, Francis Lee Higginson Professor of English, of creating by vote of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences the Standing Committee on Medieval Studies in 1973. The Medieval Studies Committee has since that time continued to bring together Harvard's many

medievalist professors and graduate students hitherto scattered in their diverse departments and schools, and to organize courses and conferences; its Medieval Studies Seminar is reputed to be the longest continuing medieval seminar series on the East Coast.

Constable enjoyed the opportunity to get to know sister institutions as a visiting professor. In this capacity he taught at St. John's University, Collegeville, Catholic University of America, Georgetown, Princeton, and Arizona State University. He also contributed to the field as Assistant Editor of *Speculum* from 1958 to 1978 and served on the editorial committees or advisory boards of the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, *Le Moyen Âge*, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, *Mediterranean Studies*, *Revue Mabillon*, and *Sacris Erudiri*. The Université de Paris I, Georgetown, Longwood University, and the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies bestowed upon him honorary degrees.

As a historian, Constable had a gift for deeply learned articles. The steady stream of well over a hundred of them began while he was still a graduate student, with studies on the Second Crusade he published in *Speculum* and *Traditio* in 1953. He authored countless thorough, critical, but courteous reviews, particularly in *Speculum*. All told, Constable wrote or edited more than twenty books on the religious and intellectual history of medieval Europe. A man who meticulously discharged his administrative and teaching duties, he sometimes sighed among intimates that an appointment to Harvard's Department of History was a good opportunity for taking copious notes in one of the world's greatest research libraries, but it afforded little leisure for writing. And so the steady stream of publications swelled considerably after he accepted an appointment to the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1985. Every year important scholarly articles still flowed from his pen—literally, since he continued to write his studies out in longhand for typing by his secretaries, and he never followed his contemporaries in shifting to computerized composition. But now books punctuated the cadence of articles: five volumes of collected articles, five works coediting medieval and modern documents, five coedited volumes of conference acts and *Festschriften*, and, most importantly, two great monographs. *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, UK, 1995) prepared the way for the work one reviewer justly qualified as "the

book of a lifetime.” Initially outlined in the Trevelyan Lectures of 1985, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, UK, 1996) distilled, synthesized, and expanded Constable’s decades of deep research and thinking about religious and social change in the age of Peter the Venerable, Abelard, Hildegard of Bingen, and Bernard of Clairvaux. On display in these two monographs are not only his meticulous erudition, sober scholarly judgment, and incomparable knowledge of religious movements and their social background, but also a quietly original mind. Like many scholars, he clothed that originality in modest garb, but those who had the privilege to know the man himself or that of deep immersion in his works will recognize his voice in the cautious integration of “the works of psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists” (*Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 319) into the succinct concluding reflections on the causes behind the broader landscape of religious change in the twelfth century. His collaborative editions of original records in this fruitful period included two published by Dumbarton Oaks. A new Latin text and English translation of William of Adam’s *How to Defeat the Saracens* appeared in 2012. It comprised annotations by, among others, his daughter, Olivia Remie Constable, the distinguished historian of medieval Iberia, Islamic and Christian, whose premature passing Constable bore with considerable fortitude. Byzantinists and historians of religion will long be grateful for Constable’s diverse contributions that underpinned the creation of Dumbarton Oaks’ monumental five volumes of English translations of Byzantine monastic foundation documents that he conceived and, with the editors John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero, sustained. For and from this work, he wrote a substantial synthesis (modestly entitled “Preface”) on the records which codified the daily life of Byzantine monks, ever with a comparative eye on the similar yet different developments of monastic institutions in the medieval West.

His creative curiosity and personal links led him also into more recent history. This was perhaps not surprising for an academic who firmly believed that persons were more important than institutions. He edited in 1993 the correspondence of his family friends and ex-patriot residents in Florence, Charles Henry Coster, a Harvard-trained late Romanist, and Bernard Berenson. Closer to home and further afield from his usual scholarly haunts was the 2015 study he devoted

to the activity of his great-grandfather, Benjamin Davidson, a Forty-Niner who was a banker, cousin, and agent of the Rothschilds of England in San Francisco, charged with purchasing gold for the Rothschilds during the Gold Rush. Davidson uncovered fraudulent conduct by his agent in charge of buying gold dust in Sacramento, none other than the future archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. Piecing together the puzzle of this story from the family papers, the Rothschild Archive in London, the California Historical Society, the Gennadius Library in Athens, and various other sources, Constable shed new light on the transatlantic global networks at work in the early economic development of California as well as the shady past of the future discoverer of Troy.

Constable organized and presented at many conferences. One of the most important, in terms of its intellectual ambition and lasting impact, was the workshop he organized at Harvard in 1977 with his friend Robert L. Benson of the University of California at Los Angeles under the auspices of the medieval studies groups of both universities and of the Medieval Academy of America. The conference marked the fiftieth anniversary of Charles Homer Haskins’s landmark publication, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1927). Constable and Benson organized it in a then-unusual format of predistributed papers with attendance strictly limited to the authors and commensurate auditors and commentators. The result, *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1982; repr. Toronto, 1991) is a volume that will long serve as an example of what a well-planned and executed scholarly conference can achieve. It not only updated five decades of work on the subjects Haskins had chosen to illustrate and establish the achievements of medieval civilization, but also added many of those that he had left aside, particularly the history of art, vernacular literatures, and the religious dimensions of cultural change. The participants read like an international who’s who of medieval studies in the later twentieth century, and included d’Alverny, Guy Beaujouan, Bloch, Peter Classen, Peter Dronke, Georges Duby, Ernst Kitzinger, Stephan Kuttner, Jean Leclercq, Richard and Mary Rouse, and Richard Southern, to name only some of the most celebrated.

Constable changed the study of the Middle Ages in America by more than his own scholarly contributions, great though they were, and his conferences.

His former students, to cite just two of many, included pioneering and original intellects of the caliber of Caroline Walker Bynum, herself an emerita professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, and of the late John Boswell, professor at Yale. Quietly and discreetly Constable also deployed the privileges of his achievements and background on behalf of gifted scholars in need with whom he had, at first, no personal connection. His insight into character and sharp eye for scholarly quality encouraged some daring moves in this respect that would reverberate for decades in American advanced research. Constable's admiration for the scholarship of an unemployed Anglo-Belgian ex-monk with no more formal education than a high school diploma from the Republic of Ireland changed that wonderfully learned man's life and the pattern of medieval scholarship in the United States, not to mention the lives of all who interacted with him. Transplanted by love from England to America, the otherworldly ex-monk soon discovered in the famous scholar-teacher a friend, advisor, and supporter who opened for him the riches of Widener Library (nominally as his research assistant). Ultimately Constable persuaded him to leave his position at Duke University in order to take the helm of *Speculum*. Under the editorship of Paul Meyvaert, that journal became one of the very top journals in medieval studies in the world, while Meyvaert himself continued to produce remarkable works of early medieval erudition on his own and in collaboration with his beloved wife, Ann Freeman. Over time, that congenial, somewhat shy, kind, and erudite man would become Constable's closest and most cherished friend, a friendship that in later years was renewed nearly yearly during Constable's visits to Cambridge and those of Meyvaert to Dumbarton Oaks or Princeton. They spoke warmly on the phone on the Sunday night barely twenty-four hours before Meyvaert's rather sudden death.

So too, not long after he took on the directorship of Dumbarton Oaks, Constable learned in 1978 of a refugee from the Soviet Union whose career (along with that of his wife) in the prestigious Academy of Sciences had come to a shattering halt out of loyalty to their son's personal choice of devout religiosity and of emigration from the U.S.S.R. Constable met Alexander P. Kazhdan in Vienna; apprised in some particulars of Kazhdan's highly innovative research by his Harvard colleague Ihor Ševčenko, Constable sized the man up quickly and positively. The result was that the

Kazhdans moved to Dumbarton Oaks in 1979, ostensibly for a year's fellowship at a time when permanent academic appointments to that institution had become a thing of the past. Exposure to Kazhdan's scholarship and somewhat austere-seeming but remarkable humanity, as well as the obvious value of having one of the greatest living Byzantinists on hand as a scholarly resource for each year's fellows, sufficed for Constable to find a way to extend the appointment. The extension continued until Kazhdan's death in 1997, after adding a prodigious number of innovative publications and a new generation of luster to this great center for the study of the Mediterranean humanities and, first and foremost, Byzantium.

Soon after his arrival in Dumbarton Oaks, Kazhdan gave a series of "informal talks" synthesizing new approaches to Byzantine history which he had begun as a series of lectures in Vienna and Paris. These lectures became *People and Power in Byzantium* (Washington, DC, 1982), Kazhdan's first book in English. Kazhdan insisted on including Constable as coauthor despite the latter's protestations; with characteristic modesty, Constable insisted that his main contribution was in the language and argument, persuading Kazhdan that some of his concepts and formulations needed revision to find a comfortable home among English-language readers. Kazhdan's golden productivity spurred a generation of younger scholars to aspire to the lofty heights he himself had attained, and he created—with Constable's encouragement and support, along with his magnificent coeditor, Alice-Mary Talbot, Dumbarton Oaks' staff, especially Catherine Brown Tkacz, and the institution's researchers—the indispensable companion to today's Byzantine studies. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 1991) is the first general reference work of its kind in the field.

It would be difficult in even a lengthy memoir to encompass Constable's permanent impact on Dumbarton Oaks and the three fields it fosters. Future historians will unpack the complexity of the situation that confronted Harvard and Dumbarton Oaks when he arrived: it was far from easy or obvious. Dumbarton Oaks was, in many respects, the personal creation of Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Barnes Bliss and the scholars they recruited to join their enterprise. In the years following Mrs. Bliss's decease (1969), Dumbarton Oaks still resembled their extended household, staffed largely by the Bliss's personal attendants and now

featuring loosely organized research nuclei of junior and senior scholars, libraries, museums, gardens, an extensively uncatalogued collection of Byzantine coins and lead seals, and various archaeological projects, all focusing on the Blisses' personal areas of academic interest: garden history, Pre-Columbian art and archaeology, and, for both Blisses, the center of gravity, the Mediterranean humanities as epitomized by Byzantine civilization.

In 1977, at this crucial turning point, Constable, by then the consummate Harvard insider as well as an internationally honored scholar, took up the directorship of Dumbarton Oaks. In a time when some doubted whether so complex and complicated an institution could thrive as part of a distant Harvard University, he ensured that this great center of humanistic learning received the structures—material, administrative, financial, institutional, and intellectual—not only to survive but to flourish and grow under his successors. Constable worked day and night to guide and shape the Blisses' inspiration into a robustly permanent place of convergence and promotion of advanced humanities research and publication in its core three disciplines, without neglecting the magnificent but ever-changing gardens as well as, at the time, an obsolete physical plant. And he did so in a period when the generous endowment that powered this unique institution suffered significant erosion from global inflationary pressures.

Constable addressed the considerable challenges of transforming this magnificent if physically deteriorating place with vigor, imagination, and discipline in a process of academic institutionalization. The results allowed Dumbarton Oaks to rebound, survive, and live up to its vast potential for supporting and even shaping major areas of humanistic study in the United States and around the globe. Tact and firmness were indispensable in dealing with the fears and rumors rampant within Dumbarton Oaks and the broader intellectual communities of which it was a central part, and with the countervailing pressures emanating from Cambridge. Yet Constable's probity, good judgment, infinite patience, and quiet toughness, as well as his unparalleled understanding of the patterns of power within Harvard, allowed him to persevere and achieve remarkable results, from institutionally appropriate governance to the replacement of rotting roofs. In all these things he was assisted by the unflagging efforts of his Assistant Director, Judith ("Judy") Siggins, an expert on modern Russian literature who became a vigorous

and effective manager of an institution that would soon be on the upswing. It would also be fair to say that Constable's studies of the internal life of medieval monastic communities—the sin of murmuring against the abbot comes to mind—gave him insight into the complexities of directing a great institution peopled by very independent-minded individuals at a time of unsought but inescapable change, even as he learned a few lessons that informed his understanding of medieval monasteries. He preserved Dumbarton Oaks' invaluable book and photo collections by rebuilding the parts of the original building that held them and by installing, for the first time, constant temperature and humidity controls, including air conditioning in areas of the building which henceforth allowed research to continue during Washington's subtropical summers.

At the same time that he built Dumbarton Oaks up from the inside and in respect to its Cambridge trustees, Constable sought to open the institution to the outside world. Thus, to the dismay of the staff who found their pool hours curtailed by the innovation, he unbolted the magnificent gardens to the general public in the summer. Deploying his international standing and intellectual connections, he worked ceaselessly to build closer relationships with the impressive but rather dispersed institutions of higher learning in the greater Washington, DC, area, from Catholic and Georgetown Universities to the University of Maryland and, further afield, Johns Hopkins. Although permanent faculty appointments had come to an end at Dumbarton Oaks, under Constable, non-permanent Research Associates and Senior Research Associates were named and helped foster at Dumbarton Oaks a continuous intellectual core which expanded each semester with the research fellowships of senior scholars and graduate students—and even one precocious undergraduate who would go on to an accomplished career in Pre-Columbian studies. The innovations included the new and highly successful Summer Fellowship program that extended manifold Dumbarton Oaks' global scholarly impact by adding months of short-term support and access to its unique collections for new groups of scholars who could not come to the institution for a full semester or academic year. Constable enlisted the scholarly and human talents of Alice-Mary Talbot as his Director of Studies, beginning another long and distinguished chapter in the gallery of minds that have done so much to shape the institution and the field. At a time when Byzantine and

late antique studies in North American universities were in danger and new appointments had nearly ceased, Constable created a lifeline for rising scholars by developing joint appointments (half-time at Dumbarton Oaks and half-time teaching and administering at a partner university) of assistant professors with local universities. Thus Constable introduced Byzantine studies to departments of Classics, Art History, and History at the University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, and American University. At Harvard University itself, Dumbarton Oaks professorships were created in Classics, History of Art and Architecture, and History, ensuring permanent representation of the Blisses' beloved Byzantine civilization in Harvard's undergraduate and graduate teaching and research.

In tandem with the gifted librarian in Byzantine studies, Irene Vaslef, Constable sought to expand the scope of that library from excellence in Byzantium to broader coverage of late antiquity and the medieval West, with the result that it is now possible to pursue research linking Byzantium to western Europe and to its Roman past in ways that were impossible in 1977. Even the Friends of Music, as it was then called, attracted his close attention. He reached beyond established Dumbarton Oaks performers and works to younger artists, such as the then newly formed Emerson String Quartet. Constable preferred to promote and explore complete cycles of great works—for instance, by that same group, the complete string quartets of Beethoven and Shostakovich, performances that still ring in the ears of those privileged to hear them. A concert by Frederica von Stade, one of the artists he most prized, was a memorable moment in the events that marked in 1984 the conclusion of Constable's service as director. In 1985 he accepted an appointment to the Faculty in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, where he became emeritus in 2003. Freed finally of the burden of university duties, Constable launched into the dizzying succession of publications evoked above.

Constable's speaking style was that of a quiet, thoughtful academic. His listening was even quieter, betraying no emotion, positive or negative. Stone-faced attention might be followed by a question posed with exquisite tact, often tacitly inviting the speaker to consider unexpected aspects of the problem she or he had just exposed. He quietly but strongly

supported the advance of women historians in a society which still blindly ignored or underappreciated their achievements.

Constable was a member of the Medieval Academy of America (elected a Fellow in 1971) and the American Historical Association. He held a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 1967 and was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1987. His international stature was recognized by election to the most prestigious learned academies in his field, including the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, Institut de France (membre associé), the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, and the Istituto Lombardo, Accademia di Scienze e Lettere (Foreign Member); he was also a corresponding member or fellow of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, the British Academy, and the Royal Historical Society.

A lifelong collector of monographs, periodicals, and primary sources relevant to his research, and particularly to medieval monasticism and church history, Constable's personal research library was in itself a scholarly achievement. It includes a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century volumes, many of which preserve texts and documents that have not been replaced by more recent publications. Acutely aware of the challenges that French colleagues faced in their daily research needs, Constable determined, in a magnificent act of generosity, to bequeath to his beloved town of Cluny 14,000 volumes in order to establish the very substantial nucleus of a future research center for medieval monasticism and history, along with a number of volumes from his late daughter's library that enrich the collection with materials relevant to Mediterranean history. The books are currently housed on the grounds of the former abbatial palace at Cluny, where they are being catalogued.

Constable's consummate modesty and distaste for display were complete. They have no better summary than his wish that his passing be marked by no ceremony, no memorial, no obituary. The desire to erase the historical memory of one who contributed so much to creating that of medieval figures may well seem paradoxical. And, were it fully obeyed, it would indeed threaten with oblivion the many great things achieved by Constable outside and alongside his prolific written monument. The present author is certain that his beloved mentor and teacher knew very well that

one person, at least, would, just this once, disregard his advice and his wishes.

Constable's first wife, Esther Van Horne Young ("Evhy"), an author of children's books who also made her mark on those privileged to know her supportive kindness during his directorship, died in 1987; his daughter, medieval historian Olivia Remie Constable, passed away in 2014. He is survived by his son, the botanist John V. H. Constable, his loving partner, Patricia Woolf, and four grandchildren.

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